Japan Bilingual Publishing Co.

Cultural Arts Research and Development

https://ojs.bilpub.com/index.php/card

ARTICLE

Coming of Age in J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye: Eriksonian Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Shadi S. Neimneh

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, The Hashemite University, Zarqa 13133, Jordan

ABSTRACT

This article examines J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) through the psychosocial lens of Erik Erikson's developmental theory, illustrating the protagonist's coming-of-age struggles as he transitions from adolescence to early adulthood. Holden Caulfield is portrayed as a teenager in crisis, clinging to the innocence of childhood—a fixation that complicates his individuation and separation from family influences in the formation of own identity. Emotionally unstable and deeply affected by traumatic experiences and the pervasive "phoniness" of his surroundings, Holden finds it difficult to succeed academically or to integrate socially with peers and schoolmates. Using the American psychoanalyst's psychosocial model on personality development, Erikson's eight stages chart, and especially the pertinent stages which capture the protagonist's age, the article seeks to justify Caulfield's plight and explore possibilities for his redemption and reasons behind his disillusionment. The argument centers on the intersection Erikson describes between two stages: adolescence and early adulthood. Holden's problems stem from his precarious position on the threshold between these stages, as well as from unresolved childhood attachments and traumas—what Erikson refers to as a "moratorium." The hypocritical and superficial adult world either seeks to exploit him or further isolates him, exacerbating his sense of alienation. However, his attachments to the memory of his deceased brother, Allie and to the purity embodied by his younger sister, Phoebe, offer him an escape from the ugly realities of the adult world. Overall, Salinger's book is one of redemption; it is a significant contribution to youth culture and the ethical imperatives of supporting adolescents during their psychosocial development.

Keywords: J. D. Salinger; *The Catcher in the Rye*; Erik Erikson; Psychosocial Development; Coming of Age; Teenage/Youth; Twentieth-Century American Fiction

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Shadi S. Neimneh, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, The Hashemite University, Zarqa 13133, Jordan; Email: shadin@hu.edu.jo

ARTICLE INFO
Received: 3 June 2025 | Revised: 7 July 2025 | Accepted: 17 July 2025 | Published Online: 25 July 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v5i2.519

CITATION
Neimneh, S.S., 2025. Coming of Age in J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye: Eriksonian Psychoanalytic Perspectives. Cultural Arts Research and Development. 5(2): 14–25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v5i2.519

1. Introduction

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is a novel about adolescence and the teenage experience, in which young individuals are caught at critical stages of their development and suffer numerous frustrations. However, the book has been viewed as problematic due to its sexual content and daring (informal) language. One publisher even rejected the manuscript on the grounds that its protagonist was not sane. Nevertheless, some readers have defended the novel's main character, Holden Caulfield, as a "social observer" who scrutinizes a "mad" society and resists conformity [1] (p. 457). As a result of its controversial nature, the novel was banned from many schools and colleges in the post-war period. Despite this, the book remains a reference point for the conflicts and challenges of growing up and offers a memorable depiction of teenage crises told in the first person. Its use of informal language contributed to its appeal among generations of teenagers who feared the responsibilities and burdens of adult life. *The Catcher in the Rye* portrays the turmoil of adolescence in an honest, memorable, and deeply personal way.

The novel can be contextualized historically, culturally, socially, and psychologically within the post-WWII American society. It reflects a worldview marked by cynical disillusionment, alienation, and identity crises that many American youths faced in an era of fragmented relationships and rapid social change. The ideals of suburban life and material prosperity contributed to the conformity and standardization of middle class life that the novel questions. Hence, the novel was also a reaction against prevailing conformity and conservatism, the influential theories of Sigmund Freud (on sexuality, the unconscious, and mental health), the emerging youth culture of new generations defying parental control, and literary traditions of young narrators questioning adult hypocrisy like Mark Twain's *The Adventures* of *Huckleberry Finn* (1885). In the history of American literature, one can even find parallels with Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) since this novel tackled relevant themes of shame/fear, internal conflict, psychological transformation, and self-discovery. Reading *The Catcher in the Rye* in light of these literary, historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts is a valuable exercise, as Salinger's novel both absorbed and reflected these traditions, capturing the post-WWII zeitgeist of American culture.

The story is narrated from an asylum not long after the events took place, with the main character recounting what happened to him a year earlier, around Christmas time. It takes the form of a possible confessional "talk cure", although there are no clear indications of a real change or growth in his condition. The novel spans two eventful days in the life of its teenage protagonist and is told in the form of a flashback to the days before Christmas, when the protagonist was only sixteen years old. Having gone through a lot like the death of his younger brother, Allie, from leukemia and being expelled from Pencey Prep school, Caulfield is confused, sad, and at times even perverse.

As a novel, Salinger's book broadly belongs to the tradition of adolescent literature or young adult fiction, with the main character being a teenager and a representative of the youth culture in inclinations, featuring a teenage protagonist who reflects the attitudes, preferences, and idiosyncrasies of youth culture. However, the book is often better appreciated by adults and mature readers. Caulfield must confront the stress, challenges, and anxieties of adolescence as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. He is tasked with forming a sense of identity—both social and sexual—while learning to relate to his changing body and the complex world around him. While teenagers often seek integration into the adult world and demonstrate resilience or adaptability, many also display tendencies toward independence, resistance, and even rebellion. Hence, teenage is characterized by role confusion and ambivalence because adolescents get lost between the world of childhood they have just left and the world of young adults they are about to enter. In the difficult and multifaceted process of maturing, adolescents might enact erratic behavior or act irresponsibly. With social pressures and psychological challenges, a healthy young man achieving integration and success is a big achievement. Generally, adolescence poses similar issues and challenges across different cultures like struggling to be independent, attempting to enter adulthood, sexual anxieties, and increased peer pressure [2] (p. 287). Looking at literary depictions of adolescence is thus an illuminating experience, and in this particular case we are looking at the American

culture in particular.

In this article, I draw upon the work of the eminent American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson rather than the influential theories of Freud, primarily because the latter focuses on psychosexual development, while the former emphasizes psychosocial growth, which is more relevant to the present discussion. Freud emphasized the importance of early childhood for identity development, yet Erikson gave more attention to lifelong growth and social relations (including the primacy of adolescence). Erikson used a specific term to describe adolescence, namely "moratorium", as a period of freedom from responsibilities and having no obvious life path, while experimenting with roles/options and searching for one's identity. This status is marked by ongoing exploration without firm commitments, often accompanied by feelings of confusion and uncertainty. As Erikson [3] (pp. 66–67) explains, the young adult has to experiment with different roles to find a "niche" in his society, which would give him a sense of continuity and sameness within his society and spare him possible confusion. In the words of Erikson [3] (p. 57), the concept identity captures "such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others." Striking a balance between uniqueness and social integration is an asset in identity formation. As it turns out, social recognition enhances or limits one's self-recognition.

Achieving identity during adolescence results in positive feelings of confidence, authenticity, and a clear future vision. In the words of Newman and Newman [4] (p. 552), the ego/self is stretched through the positive formation of personal identity during adolescence: "This identity is a creative integration of past identifications, future aspirations, and contemporary talents and abilities that is formed within a context of cultural expectations and demands." Judged against such standards, Caulfield seems to be lacking some bases for successful identity formation, mainly integrating childhood identifications into his current adolescence or using childhood and adolescence to form a future vision. Hence, he is a teenager or an adolescent in crisis. This article will investigate his shortcomings within the context of his life and surroundings. It will also justify Caulfield's failings and explore venues for his positive identity construction.

Salinger's novel is part of a rich tradition in American literature in both theme and genre. The idea of adolescence, Ihab Hassan [5] (p. 324) contends, captures "the dialectic of innocence and experience" as adolescents are trapped and influenced by tendencies from both the earlier stage of innocent childhood and the coming stage of adulthood and responsibility, which should allow for some ambivalence and contradiction like that between idealism and reality. For Hassan, Salinger's book offers another image of adolescents and sheds light on "the perennial conflict between the self and the world" [5] (p. 313). And although Caulfield's initiation into the world of experience is a failure, "the occasion of failure may be discovered in a tortured awareness of reality rather than in any absence of it" [5] (p. 324). Whether we call the novel a piece of young adult fiction or adolescent literature, it can be read as a book about the troubled identity formation of a teenager as well as our ethical duties of relating to teenagers by accommodating them, not exploiting them, and giving them another chance in life.

The work of Erik Erikson has made it clear that adolescence is the crucial stage of identity formation in the ideal state and identity confusion in the negative state. In youth, by contrast, "individuals are confirmed in their identities" [6] (p. 20), although adolescent modes of thinking and lifestyles might still impact the life of a young man. If Caulfield has an issue (be it social, mental, or psychological), many factors have contributed to this so-called identity crisis. Right on the first page of the book, we hear him complaining about a "lousy childhood" and parental occupation [7] (p. 1). Social seclusion is also an apparent and contributing cause of his troubles. When the novel opens, he misses the football game of Pencey with Saxon Hall although most students do attend. And he complains about fake people, with his headmaster of Pencey Mr. Thurmer being "a phony slob" [7] (p. 2). His tale has many inconsistencies and contradictions, and he emerges as an unreliable narrator: "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life." [7] (p. 10). He claims that he is illiterate, and yet that he reads a lot [7] (p. 11). He complains about fake people, yet he himself is not sincere: "I'm always saying 'Glad to've met you' to somebody I'm not at all glad I met." [7] (p. 52). Caulfield consciously alienates

himself from others. Socially, he is not successful, and he can throw rude remarks and pick fights with roommates or dates. We concede that he is neither normal nor stable, yet we cannot always blame him for the social ills he observes and rejects.

All in all, the coming-of-age genre and identity formation theme merge in Salinger's novel to offer readers rich insights into the problems of growing up, social integration, and acculturation. The stage of adolescence, being trapped between childhood and adulthood, is that of identity construction and potential relevant crises. However, as Erikson (1956) succinctly puts it, identity formation "neither begins nor ends with adolescence" but is "a lifelong development" [3] (p. 69) influenced by the past, shaped by the present, and anticipating the future. When read against Erikson's theories, Salinger's novel gains more grounding as a book that captures youth culture in terms of problems and challenges. It also gains more thematic relevance in terms of its ethical dimensions concerned with accommodating the youth and empathizing with them.

2. Literature Review

Although many critics have read Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* using different approaches and focusing on multiple themes, the influential psychoanalytic work of the German-born American psychologist Erik Erikson has not been adequately used to look into identity issues in the novel. This article is an attempt to fill this gap in available scholarship on the novel by applying Eriksonian psychoanalytic perspectives on the psychosocial identity formation of Salinger's protagonist. An attempt is made to locate Holden Caulfield's problems in the difficult intersection, i.e., "moratorium" in the technical language of Erikson, between childhood and adolescence on the one hand and young adulthood on the other hand. It is this intersection between the two stages that this article interrogates and builds on, unlike many available studies which just focus on the teenage stage of adolescence in their employment of Eriksonian theories. In other words, this article looks at gaps, fissures, and arrest in identity development, which is what Erikson hints at in the use of the term "moratorium" as a prohibition or suspension of development.

Many critics have pointed out Caulfield's social and personal failings. Gerald Rosen once described the novel as one of "disillusionment" and a blatant depiction of Salinger's "disappointment with American society" [8] (p. 548). Caulfield is, for the most part, a detached, alienated youth not finding the institutional guidance he is expecting from religion, parents, and schools. Caulfield, according to Gail Corso, is both "emotionally and physically distanced" from his parents and peers, dissatisfied with many "societal norms" while still revealing "an ethic of care and concern for children" [9] (p. 96). His society, in its pursuit of industrialization, commercialism, and superficial relations, has failed him.

Other critics have seen Caulfield as a negative character. According to Güven and Őzcan, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a novel about "the importance of innocence and its preservation" [10] (p. 171) against the fake and phony realities of the world of adults. Lingdi Chen also discusses major adolescent problems Caulfield faces, like alienation, the phoniness of the adult world, and his gradual yet inevitable loss of innocence [11] (p. 143). In a related line of thought, Sasani and Javidnejat, drawing on Kenneth Keniston's theories on alienation, discuss Salinger's protagonist as an alienated youth due to factors like his negative outlook, pessimism, and distrust of commitments [12] (p. 204). For such critics, he is not only "one of the loneliest characters in fiction" but also a "traumatized teenager" [12] (p. 209). According to Duane Edwards, Caulfield is deficient and antisocial; he "shares in the phoniness he loathes" and withdraws from "the challenge of personal relationships" [13] (p. 554). Edwards also argues that despite Caulfield's "latent homosexual desires" [13] (p. 561), his sexual identity is still vague, which is possibly indicated by his inability to lose his virginity. Defining authenticity in terms of a "disdain for phoniness and fakery", Adam Kadlac contends that the term has to do with how we present ourselves to society and how we are viewed by others [14] (p. 791). In this light, Kadlac argues, Caulfield finds his schoolmates, his school, his parents, and the world around him lacking in this authenticity [14] (p. 792). This can be understood if we consider how he is attached to the dead or children but not to his peers or the adults around him.

Writing fifty years after its publication, Louis Menand contends that Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* has a protagonist who thinks like an adult even though he uses the language of a teenager. He has superable powers

of observation and quick wits. Thus, Menand describes Caulfield as "a demon of verbal incision" [15] (p. 3). By contrast, Benjamin Priest views Caulfield as "the ill adolescent" deviating from the group of adolescents in his age [16] (p. 210). Because Caulfield is an ill protagonist, it follows that there is "no triumphant emergence into adulthood" but only "despair and defeat." [16] (p. 211). Caulfield has antiheroic traits found in many pieces of modern and twentieth century fiction. It could be argued that his shortcomings reflect aspects of cultural decline around him rather than personal failings. Thus, he is a symptomatic figure representing a generation of American youth in the era following WWI and WWII.

Reading the novel as a "narrative of recognition" [17] (p. 603) and Caulfield as a self-narrator, Stephanie Schäfer focuses on scenarios of encounters between narrator and addressee, whereby readers are called on to recognize the narrator as the teller of the story and even sympathize with him. Studying the carnivalesque spirit in the novel, Yasuhiro Takeuchi contends that Bakhtin's theories on subversion, challenge to authority, and the mixing of the sacred and the profane can be applied to the novel. Takeuchi's reading of the novel is in line with postmodern logic and theorizing [18] (p. 332). According to Baer and Gesler, "Therapeutic landscapes are part of Holden's real and imagined geographies-the mental hospital, a field of rye, a museum, a cabin camp…and are woven thoroughly into his identity" [19] (p. 405). The museum and his sister's school, however, turn out to be no ready places of peace or innocence, with signs of defilement written on their walls or bad smells reeking off them. Thus, they turn out to be "ambivalent" spaces [19] (p. 410), which complicates Caulfield's transition between childhood and adulthood.

Some critics (like Susan Mizruchi) have acknowledged that the narrative of the novel can be read as "a work of mourning" for Holden's dead brother Allie and a book of "violent confrontations" [20] (pp. 29–30), real or imagined, with the protagonist displaying "an almost cultish susceptibility to suffering" or bloodletting [20] (p. 31). Hence, it turns out that the intricate intersection between the stage of childhood, Caulfield's current adolescence, and the upcoming early youth has not been adequately analyzed by critics or readers. While this article negotiates such an interplay, it also aims to consider the nature of Caulfield's plight and visions of hope in the novel. It is evident that the clinical and psychocultural/psychoanalytic research of Erik Erikson cannot be simply applied to a work of fiction without complication or objections. And autobiographical questions on Salinger's part (i.e., Salinger's personal investment in Caulfield's character) are another murky domain. However, Salinger's portrayal of Caulfield with such appeal, such realistic weight, and such psychological depth is a worthy case in point.

3. Identity Diffusion and the Psychological Moratorium: Eriksonian Perspectives

Erikson contends that the transition between childhood and adulthood, though challenging, allows for what he terms "*sanctioned intermediary periods*" [3] (p. 66), which he calles "psychosocial moratoria" and during which, he postulated, one's inner identity gets developed without obvious commitments [3] (p. 66). Caulfield, in the age of seventeen when the novel ends and recounting events that occured a year earlier when he was sixteen, is portrayed as an adolescent trapped between the stages of childhood and adulthood. He narrates the events of the novel from a mental institution, roughly a year being expelled from Pencey Prep school. The stage of adolescence, Erikson contends, is one of internal conflict and can be characterized by instances of confusion and loss: "identity diffusion" or "ego diffusion" [21] (p. 162); it is "an interim stage between an alternately invigorating and confusing sense of an overdefined past that must be left behind and a future as yet to be identified-and to be identified with." [21] (p. 158). Erikson's psychological moratorium is located, hence, in that difficult transition between the past of childhood and the future of youth.

The stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, which is directly relevant to the argument and conception of this discussion, begins with puberty as the onset of youth and is mainly characterized by a search for identity. Erikson contends that "The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the *moratorium* psychological stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult." [22] (pp. 262–263). Adolescents in this stage of identity construc-

tion/identity crisis have to cope with their own internal emotional and physical growth while responding to and interacting with the world of adults. As Erikson puts it, adolescents are now "primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are." [22] (p. 261). Caulfield's younger sister, Phoebe, reveals his sense of role confusion when she asks him about what he likes in life, like his preference for a specific vocation or calling. Her practical question is a reaction to his unexpected arrival at the family house in New York after getting dismissed from Pencey as well as his romanticized conception of childhood. By way of defending himself and responding to her question, he claims that the school is full of phonies; he also affirms: "I like Allie" and adds: "I like doing what I'm doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff, and—" [7] (p. 100). Then comes Caulfield's memorable wish of wanting to be "the catcher in the rye," which gives the novel its title and hints at a possible role out of the identity confusion adolescents often encounter.

Commenting on the complexity of identity formation in psychological terms, Erikson argues that it employs "a process of simultaneous reflection and observation" [23] (p. 22) whereby the individual judges their identity with relation to the judgment of others as well as their own perception of this judgment in a complicated mental process. Hence, Erikson contends that identity is neither fixed nor stable [23] (p. 24). Rather, it is a process of transitions, negotiations, and disparate influences. The age of sixteen and seventeenth, which is the age of Caulfield in the novel, is critical for identity formation. Adolescents at this stage seek independence, build peer relationships, experience anxiety about the future, and experiment with new roles and deal with new expectations. Caulfield captures such ironies and contradictions in asserting that he is exceptionally tall for his age, being more than six feet, and yet having grey hair or acting a lot younger/older [7] (p. 5). Explaining to Mr. Spencer, his history teacher at Pencey, how his parents will deal with his being dismissed from another school, Caulfield says that his life carries many contradictions which capture his position on the threshold of three stages: childhood, adolescence, and early youth; "I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. It's really ironical, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair." [7] (p. 5). As outlined by Erikson, the fourth psychosocial stage is "Industry vs. Inferiority" and covers the age of 5–11 [22] (pp. 258–266). Children in this age try to be successful and take pride in their accomplishments. The fifth, and crucial, stage is characterized by "Identity vs. Role Confusion" and spans the years 12–19. This is when adolescents begin to ask questions about who they are and establish an independent sense of self. Stage six, "Intimacy vs. Isolation" concerns early adulthood and the twenties. It is characterized by an exploration of personal relationships like living with someone or alone.

An understanding of Caulfield's psychosocial problems can be facilitated through an analysis of the overlap among those three concerned stages. This implies that identity formation is essential for learning to love and form alliances. When this process of forming intimate relations malfunctions, we can expect isolation. Of course, the logic of intimacy with some people entails the exclusion of others as well as fusing one's identity with that of another. Erikson argues that the young adult, as a consequence of identity search and construction, becomes ready for "intimacy, that is, the capacity to commit himself to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises" [23] (p. 263). Failure to establish a stable identity often results in an inability to engage in intimate, lasting relationships.

Erikson, commenting on the ambivalent and unstable nature of adolescence, argues that this stage has consistently been perceived as wavering between a defined past and an uncertain future. He defines "intensified adolescence", often characterized by unresolved conflicts and isolation, as "a critical phase marked by the reciprocal aggravation of internal conflict and of societal and disorganization." [21] (p. 156). He conceptualizes the psychological moratorium as a period during which a young person "can dramatize or at any rate experiment with patterns of behavior which are both-or neither quite-infantile and adult, and yet often find a grandiose alignment with traditional ideals or new ideological trends." [21] (p. 157). This process of moratorium entails suspension of responsibilities or commitments in search of new identities. According to Erikson, identity confusion or "ego diffusion" is the expansion of the

boundaries of the self the adolescent ego needs to grow as with states of "love, sexual union, and friendship, of discipleship and followership, and of creative inspiration." [21] (p. 162). One task young adults should learn is caring for and being responsible for their younger brothers and sisters [21] (p. 173). This ego confusion Caulfield goes through, in a sense, counters the narcissism of early childhood and infancy.

In this stage of psychological moratorium, Caulfield appears lost, unable to pursue a clear direction in either his academic or personal life. He is suspended between childhood and adolescence on the one hand, and adolescence and early adulthood on the other. In Erikson's framework, the moratorium is a difficult, anxious stage of tense emotions when adolescents try not only multiple roles but also different values and beliefs. The psychosocial moratorium is still significant because the adolescent searches for their place in society and moral codes. Occurring late in adolescence, it can yield identity development in the positive spectrum or identity crisis/confusion in the negative one. Hence, understanding Caulfield's difficult transition into early youth and the related psychosocial problems he has as a teenager can be understood in light of Erikson's explication of the psychological moratoria as times of suspended growth waiting to be resolved socially, psychologically, and mentally.

4. Trauma, Integration, and Healing

Caulfield's major problem with those around him, especially adults, is their "phoniness", which he understands as their insincerity or lack of authenticity. His own older brother, D. B., for example, gave up writing stories to pursue screenwriting in Hollywood, thus embracing fame and money over creative genius and personal fulfillment and becoming a sellout. However, Caulfield counters that fakeness and hypocrisy in his true love for his little sister Phoebe, the memory of an ex-classmate (James Castle), and in his dream of being the protector of happiness. It is part of his cure that he will always be there to protect Phoebe and that he cannot stop everyone from the passage of time and the normal stages of life.

Feeling lonely, he once hires a prostitute but hesitates to have sex with her, claiming that he had an operation before and that he just needs to talk. The acquaintances he meets after getting dismissed from school like Sally Hayes, a young woman he dated in the past, and Carl Luce, a former student at Whooton and now a student at Columbia, end up being bothered by him rather than satisfied with his company. He finds people phony, yet they find him cynical and even rude. His main problem is refusing to accept change and not being willing to enter the adult world. This resistance is echoed in his fondness for the museum, where the exhibits remain unchanged and fixed in time.

For the most part, Caulfield is lonely and depressed, which may help explain his fear of adulthood. The death of his younger brother (Allie, few years before the events of the novel) deeply impacted his psyche. Confronted with hypocrisy, offensiveness, and vulgarity of the adult world, Caulfield has to choose between acceptance and conformity on the one hand or madness on the other hand [24] (p. 583). In addition to the trauma of personal loss, the cultural atmosphere of disillusionment and despair following WWII augmented his anxiety and depression. Hence, Caulfield can be seen as emblematic of "a generation who observed the destruction and experienced the trauma of the war" [25] (p. 1825) as manifested in their depression and fears. As captured in the words of one critic, Caulfield "has no unfolding destiny, no mission" and is "a drifter whose life story is a muddle." [26] (p. 181). If he is traumatized, it is not because of "a physical or mental defect, but it is a consequence of the familiar disintegration, the social structure, and the sense of estrangement in the battle of life." [27] (p. 330). This section of the article examines at aspects of Caulfield's trauma while also hinting at visions of hope for a way out in the future. Although he remains held back by the past, there is a suggestion that Caulfield may find healing in time—and through time.

Moving between different schools and not achieving academic success is an indication of an unstable childhood. Caulfield complains to one teacher, Mr. Spencer, that he left Elkton school because he was surrounded by phonies, including the headmaster [7] (p. 8). The death of his younger brother of leukemia at the age of eleven seemed to have traumatized him more than anything else because it shattered his belief in a protected childhood and exposed his inability to save this weak childhood:

> *I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don't blame them. I really don't. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time, and I couldn't do it. It was a very stupid thing to do, I'll admit, but I hardly didn't even know I was doing it, and you didn't know Allie [7] (p. 24).*

While his hand still hurts, his mind aches just like his body. The emotional shock he suffered from made him violent and lonely. Apparently, Caulfield is going through the identity crisis Erikson often ascribed to "the age of adolescence and young adulthood" [23] (p. 17) and viewed as essential to a normative personality. However, the social aspects related to his family play a huge part in his trauma as well as expected recovery.

Sexual anxieties and tensions characterize much of Caulfield's adolescent life. He finds Ernest Morrow's mother, a fellow student at Pencey, charming and offers her a cigarette on the train to New York, thinking that she has much "sex appeal". He confesses that he likes women and that he is sexually attracted to them [7] (pp. 33–35). Once in New York, he decides to stay in a hotel for two days until Christmas vacation starts. There, at Edmont hotel, and when he goes to his room, he sees from the window the other side of the hotel with perverts, one wearing a woman's clothes and another couple squirting water into each other's mouths, which confuses Caulfield's conception of normalcy versus eccentricity. Plainly, he claims that sex is something he does not really understand [7] (pp. 38–39). Nevertheless, sexual repression becomes a major obstacle to his emotional and psychological development—and thus to the formation of his identity. Hence, it is not surprising to find him declare: "In my mind, I'm probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very crumby stuff I wouldn't mind doing if the opportunity came up." [7] (p. 38) Nevertheless, Caulfield is just confused by both his own sexual drive and the sexual practices of peers and acquaintances. For him, sex is a problem rather than a solution, reflecting his deeper difficulty with entering the adult world.

When he accepts the elevator's boy, Maurice, offer to send him a prostitute to his hotel room, Caulfield gets anxious because he did not have a full intimate relation before: "I was a little nervous. I was starting to feel pretty sexy and all, but I was a little nervous anyway. If you want to know the truth, I'm a virgin. I really am. I've had quite a few opportunities to lose my virginity and all, but I've got around to it yet." [7] (p. 54). He accepts the sexual offer because he is "depressed" and because he wants to break this obstacle of virginity [7] (pp. 54–55). However, this loss of virginity necessitates a transition into a new developmental phase where innocence is lost. He asks Sunny if she feels like talking instead of having sex and then claims he just had an operation to escape getting intimate with her. His reluctance to lose his virginity can be understood in symbolic terms to mean his fear of growing up. Having returned to the hotel after going to Ernie's nightclub and getting drunk, he is still anxious and hesitant. He has tried before several times to lose his virginity, yet he would stop before getting this over with. His reaction to being depressed and miserable is talking loud to his dead brother [7] (p. 59). Apparently, Caulfield is a traumatized teenager in crisis. Evasion and hesitation are symptoms of such a crisis.

In this incident, Caulfield does not seek sex but conversation. He is lonely and depressed, and he immediately offers to pay the prostitute five dollars simply to talk. In Eriksonian psychoanalytic terms, he is not ready yet to fuse his identity with those of others: "To a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation" [23] (p. 132). When the girl leaves, he is more depressed, and he begins to talk aloud to his dead brother Allie. Erikson proceeds that "It is only when identity formation is well on its way that true intimacy–which is really a counterpointing as well as a fusing of identities—is possible." [23] (p. 135). This indicates that Caulfield's problems with intimacy as well as his sexual jealousy are indicative of his immature identity formation. When he calls an ex-girlfriend,

Sally Hayes, and they get together, she leaves him crying after he makes a rude remark. Another former schoolmate, Carl Luce, leaves the bar where they get together after his rude comments. Such failures indicate that Caulfield is not confirmed in his identity yet to the level of extending his ego boundaries for intimate relations.

Sexual tension and anxiety characterize much of Caulfield's behavior. This can be understood in the context of his awakening to sexual desire during adolescence, where sexual experimentation is often essential to identity development, with the physical complementing the social and psychological aspects of growth. Caulfield picks a fight with a fellow student at Pencey, Stradlater, because he assumes that Stradlater had a sexual encounter with his friend Jane Gallagher: "Every time I thought about it, I felt like jumping out the window. The thing is, you didn't know Stradlater. I knew him. Most guys at Pencey just talked about having sexual intercourse with girls all the time—like Ackley, for instance—but old Stradlater really did it" [7] (p. 30). His relationship with his roommate Stradlater marks both his sexual anxiety and feelings of sexual rivalry. He asks an acquaintance from Whooton school years named Carl Luce, now a university student, about his sexual life when he meets him at a bar. Caulfield justifies his troubled sex life to Carl Luce saying: "You know what the trouble with me is? I can never get really sexy –I mean really sexy—with a girl I don't like a lot. I mean I have to like her a lot. If I don't, I sort of lose my goddam desire for her and all. Boy, it really screws up my sex life something awful. My sex life stinks" [7] (p. 86). Hence, Luce advises Caulfield to seek a psychoanalyst. His parents also wanted to have him psychoanalyzed when he was younger after the trauma of his brother's death.

In addition to the personal trauma of losing a sibling, Caulfield also experiences different forms levels of sexual trauma. His former English teacher at Elkton Hills, Mr. Antolini, thinks that he is down for some catastrophe and that he will die for an unworthy cause. He views Caulfield as a defeated victim rather than a hero: "I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall. But I don't honestly know what kind. . . Are you listening to me?" [7] (p. 110). Caulfield goes to Antolini's apartment to spend a night while gaining time for Christmas vacation to begin and thus be able to return home. He wakes up to find Antolini patting him on his head. Taking that to be a sexual gesture of molestation, he immediately leaves, assuming Antolini to be a pervert, not much different from the phonies he had known at different schools he went to. Antolini calling Caulfield "handsome" when he wishes him good night or telling him that he is simply sitting and "admiring" [7] (pp. 113–114) when he suddenly wakes up nervous and embarrassed that his former teacher is touching his head all heighten Caulfield's sense of role confusion and even sexual identity crisis. In this particular incident with Antolini, Caulfield is confirmed in his distrust of the phony world of adults. In a sense, most adults around Caulfield fail to help him in the process of socialization. Association with adults is expected to help him with the formation of a positive identity, but the result here is a reverse one. Many ethnologists, like Alice Schlegel (2000), have yet asserted that "contact with adults is important for adolescents." [28] (p. 144). What happens in this specific incident with Antolini is the opposite and even somewhat traumatic. Caulfield claims to be a victim of sexual harassment as a kid: "That kind of stuff's happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid. I can't stand it." [7] (p. 115). His difficulty in forming meaningful connections with others becomes increasingly apparent, and by the end of the novel, he fantasizes about living in a cabin, isolated from the phony world around him.

However, we get to know that Caulfield is reconciled with Phoebe, whom he takes to the zoo, and that he plans to get back to school after therapy. The novel ends with his decision to end his story at that point rather than continue with what he did after he went home or an explanation of how he got sick or the school he is supposed to join next fall. For Erikson, "The problem of adulthood is how to *take care* of those to whom one finds oneself committed as one emerges from the identity period, and to whom one now owes *their* identity." [23] (p. 33). Successful relations, hence, follow as a result of effectual identity formation. The adolescence period of identity formation is followed by the adulthood stage in which identity is formed with relation to others. This means that an acceptance of others is important for self-definition because this helps Caulfield to see himself with relation to others, even those whom he does not get along with very well. The novel memorably and meaningfully ends with Caulfield's assertion: "About

all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice." [7] (p. 126). Caulfield suggests reconciliation with others, even those who offended him. Hence, he is probably a step closer towards social integration after a period of confusion and stagnation.

As the guardian of innocence, Caulfield resists change. This is indicated in his liking for the Museum of Natural History in the park: "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. …Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you." [7] (p. 71). The same visitor would be different every time they visit the museum in terms of age, experiences, companions, impressions, …etc. However, the museum itself would be the same in terms of its location, the animals and the people displayed there, and the moments of being it captures. The museum freezes the time that flies by, which is something Caulfield is not able to do as he inevitably leaves childhood behind and approaches early youth. Hence, he is frustrated when he sees dirty language written on the walls of a school or a museum and displayed for young, innocent children. As the preserver of innocence, which is indicated by the novel's title, Caulfield tells his sister Phoebe that he pictures many little kids playing in a field of rye with him being the only guardian keeping them away from a cliff:

> *What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy [7] (p. 102).*

As opposed to his innocent dreams and fantasies, the dirty language written to the walls and staircases of Phoebe's school and the museum of art brings him back to the ugly realities of growing up. As the preserver of innocence and even "sanity", he tries to rub such profanities off with his hands. This act symbolizes his struggle to protect purity in a world that constantly defiles it. However, part of Caulfield's maturing process involves accepting the inevitability of change and the "madness" or sordid realities of life. It is only when he learns to accept this "madness" as a normal part of the human condition that he can begin to thrive both socially and psychologically.

Hence, Caulfield is trying to remain true and innocent against a dirty, fake world of adults. He wants to be the guardian of the virtues of childhood against the "phony", mad world of adults. Those who fall off the cliff enter another world, symbolically adulthood. Therefore, taking his sister to the zoo and watching her play on the carousel give him the happiness and satisfaction of attachment to childhood. However, and significantly, Caulfield learns to accept a transition to the next stage and the risks involved in the process. Since he cannot save everyone, he accepts growth and maturity as the next stage of identity construction:

> *All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddamn horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them [7] (pp. 124–125).*

He now accepts the virtues of self-learning and self-correction, which is a sign of development and maturity. He changes his former position of wanting to be "The Catcher in the Rye" who saves all innocent children to a concern for Phoebe. And through Phoebe, he is saving his own soul from a corrupt adult world. Through caring for Phoebe and watching her grow through obstacles and frustrations, he is redeeming his identity and learning from the harsh realities of life.

5. Conclusions

According to Hipple et al., adolescent fiction is expected to be valuable to readers because it explores problems and suggests solutions to challenges similar to those faced by teenagers in real life [29] (p. 142). In Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* Caulfield is a teenager in crisis in a story of universal relevance. Facing the problems and

anxieties of the adult world he detests, he tries to stick to the innocence of childhood against the fake realities of the adult world he is necessarily moving into. He is caught between the adolescence of teenage life and the onset of early adulthood, yet he does not feel secure in either stage. His failure to stay in the innocence of childhood is thematically significant. It not only signifies the necessity of developmental growth but also indicates the necessary coping mechanisms like dealing with trauma, attention to significant others within one's family, and the ultimate acceptance of change. He has to give up the innocence of childhood so that his younger sister Phoebe can successfully negotiate that stage, and he can act as her mature guardian. When he takes her to the park, he is happy that she rides the carrousel twice [7] (p. 125). He gives her back her money too. The rain suggests a new start and a fresh stage in their lives. It is a cleansing metaphor for the traumas and difficult times he has been though. Despite Caulfield's frustrations and failures, the novel ultimately suggests a possibility of hope and emotional growth.

Although he suffers from identity confusion and developmental setbacks, there remains an expectation that Caulfield may begin anew—whether in school or in society—after his time in the mental institution. At the start of the novel, Caulfield is already in a sanatorium, and he mentions that he will return home the following month. Early in the novel, Mr. Spencer, his history teacher, asks him: "Do you feel absolutely no concern for your future, boy?" [7] (p. 9). During the course of the narrative, Caulfield fantasizes about living alone in a cabin in the west, West, far from the "phony" world, and refuses to take Phoebe with him, claiming he wants to go alone. At the very end of the novel, and in a reflexive fictional ploy, he is no longer interested in the story as a narrative. He plans to go to a new school next fall after he gets out of the sanatorium. In the sanatorium, he even misses people he told us about like Stradlater, Ackley, and Maurice. Readers also learn that he returned home after his adventure with Phoebe in the park with Phoebe and that his parents are now aware of his expulsion from school. If the novel holds out any sense of hope, it resides in the future—specifically in time's capacity to heal trauma. Caulfield begins to show a growing ability to feel empathy and form connections with others beyond his immediate family, particularly with the young Phoebe and deceased Allie.

Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye* not only created a compelling depiction of youth but also made us feel ethically responsible for the otherness or deviancy Caulfield embodies. By interpreting his stalled psychosocial development through Erikson's theory of the psychological moratorium, readers are better able to understand his character, empathize with his pain, and recognize his limitations. Therefore, Salinger's novel carries a subtle yet powerful ethical dimension related to youth culture and the broader challenge of engaging with and supporting that culture. Although the novel initially received mixed reviews and provoked controversy, it eventually became a cultural landmark. It was originally intended for adult readers, yet found immense popularity among high school and college students. Despite being banned in many American schools and libraries during the 1960s and 1970s for grounds its perceived profanity and subversive content, it has endured as a classic work on adolescent anxiety and rebellion. It remains a defining novel about the teenage experience—of being caught between a troubled childhood and an uncertain future.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The author is ready to share data supporting this article and answer relevant queries.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Dashti, S., Bahar, I., 2015. Resistance as madness in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies. 5(3), 457–462. DOI: http://dx.doi.

org/10.17507/tpls.0503.01

[2] Schlegel, A., Hewlett, B., 2011. Contributions of anthropology to the study of adolescence. Journal of Research on Adolescence. 21(1), 281–289.

[3] Erikson, E., 1956. The problem of ego identity. Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association. 4, 56–121. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/000306515600400104

[4] Newman, P., Newman, B., 1988. Differences between childhood and adulthood: The identity watershed. Adolescence. 23(91), 551–557.

[5] Hassan, I., 1958. The idea of adolescence in American fiction. American Quarterly. 10(3), 312–324. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2710345

[6] Erikson, E., 1988. Youth: Fidelity and diversity. Daedalus. 117(3), 1–24. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20025167

[7] Salinger, J.D., 1951. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Little, Brown & Company: Boston, MA, USA.

[8] Rosen, G., 1977. A retrospective look at *The Catcher in the Rye*. American Quarterly. 29(5), 547–562. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712573

[9] Corso, G.S., 2016. Allie, Phoebe, Robert Emmet, and Daisy Mae: Love, loss, and grief in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Alice McDermott's Child of My Heart. Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice. 8(3), 92–111.

[10] Güven, F., Özcan, R., 2021. Innocence and trauma in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. RumeliDE Journal of Language and Literature Studies. (S9), 170–176. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.981517

[11] Chen, L., 2009. An analysis of the adolescent problems in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Asian Social Science. 5(5), 143–146.

[12] Sasani, S., Javidnejat, P., 2015. A discourse of the alienated youth in the American culture: Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Asian Social Science. 11(15), 204–210.

[13] Edwards, D., 1977. Holden Caulfield: 'Don't ever tell anybody anything.' EHL. 44(3), 554–565. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2872573

[14] Kadlak, A., 2018. The challenge of authenticity: Enhancement and accurate self-representation. Journal of Applied Philosophy. 35(4), 790–808. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12266

[15] Menand, L., 2001. Holden at fifty. The New Yorker. Available from: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/10/01/holden-at-fifty

[16] Priest, B., 2016. *The Catcher in the Rye* and the ill member of the group: Holden Caulfield and adolescent development. Psychodynamic Practice. 22(3), 209–222. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2016.1198273

[17] Schäfer, S., 2012. 'Recognition is a form of agreement': The workings of self-narration in '*The Catcher in the Rye*' and 'Invisible Man'. Amerikastudien/American Studies. 57(4), 603–626. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43485842

[18] Takeuchi, Y., 2002. The burning carousel and the carnivalesque: Subversion and transcendence at the close of '*The Catcher in the Rye*'. Studies in the Novel. 43(3), 320–336. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533518

[19] Baer, L., Gesler, W., 2004. Reconsidering the concept of therapeutic landscapes in J. D. Salinger's '*The Catcher in the Rye*'. Area. 36(4), 404–413. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20004414

[20] Mizruchi, S., 2015. The school of martyrdom: Culture and class in 'Catcher in the Rye'. Religion & Literature. 47(2), 23–40. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24752885

[21] Erikson, E., 1970. Reflections on the dissent of contemporary youth. Daedalus. 99(1), 154–176. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20023939

[22] Erikson, E., 1993. Childhood and Society. Norton & Company: Phoenix, AZ, USA.

[23] Erikson, E., 1994. Identity, Youth and Crisis. Norton: New York, NY, USA.

[24] Mankhi, A.H., 2018. Social critique in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Opcion. 34(17), 578–600.

[25] Wan Yahya, W.R., Babaee, R., 2014. Salinger's depiction of trauma in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies. 4(9), 1825–1828. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.4.9.1825-1828

[26] Castronovo, D., 2001. Holden Caulfield's legacy. New England Review. 22(2), 180–186. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40243971

[27] Daikh, H., 2020. The trauma of alienation in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change. 13(9), 327–335. Available from: www.ijicc.net

[28] Schlegel, A., 2000. Strangers or friends? The need for adults in the life of adolescents. Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde. 46, 137–148. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40341786

[29] Hipple, T.W., 1984. Twenty adolescent novels (and more) that counselors should know about. The School Counselor. 32(2), 142–148.